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Solid rocket pioneer Paavo John Rahkonen dies at age 79

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SATURDAY, JANUARY 16, 2010

OGDEN, Utah USA — After three years of battling a rare incurable blood disease, American solid rocket propulsion pioneer Paavo John Rahkonen died December 16th, 2009.

Paavo John Rahkonen 1930-2009

Rahkonen was born in Brooklyn, New York, on January 6th, 1930, the second child of Paarly Johannes Rahkonen and Linda Lujunen, Finnish nationals who immigrated to the United States from Finland.

After he graduated from Bay Ridge High School in Brooklyn, his educational journey would see Rahkonen studying at the U.S.A.F. Institute of Technology as well as the University of Tennessee and the Polytechnic Institute of New York University.

As a child, young Rahkonen was shaken by the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, an act that would shape his future career path. His motivation was to build rockets in hopes of literally leaving the planet, seeking answers from wiser extraterrestrial beings who could instruct the people on Earth how to live in peace.

Rahkonen joined the U.S. Air Force in January of 1948 and then left the service in 1954. He went on to work with the Republic Aviation Corporation of New York, the Curtiss-Wright Corporation of New Jersey and the Martin Company, now know as Lockheed Martin, in Denver, Colorado. Ultimately, Rahkonen would end up Morton-Thiokol in Utah, where he directed research and development of their rocket propellant development laboratory, and is credited with being the person who developed the solid rocket motor propellent currently used in the detachable boosters of the NASA Space Shuttle.

A scene from "Ihmeellinen viesti toiselta tähdeltä" pictures a passionate rocketeer. Photo: International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam

Rahkonen's work with ammonium perchlorate composite propellant would eventually trickle down into the hobby rocketry community. G. Harry Stine, commonly referred to as the father of hobby rocketry, introduced the hobby community to Rahkonen in a 1963 issue of *American Modeler* magazine with the mention of a new model rocket company called Scientific Amateur Supply Company (SASCO), located in Ogden, Utah.

SASCO would go on become Propulsion Dynamics, more commonly known in the hobby as Prodyne, which would bring three model rockets to the market; the Swift, Swallow and Skylark. In addition to the three kits were three black power rocket motors; a D2, an E2 and an F2, called "Cyclone" motors, utilizing plastic cases and ceramic nozzles. Rahkonen and Prodyne would eventually go on to develop and market a K700 composite high power rocket motor that was available in the early 90's.

Rahkonen's history with rocket propellant and the ties to other model rocketry luminaries from the past were a direct result of his employment at Thiokol's solid rocket propellant plant in Brigham City, Utah, where he worked with Irving S. Wait and George Roos, creating composite rocket motors used in the United States' intercontinental ballistic missile program. Wait was the founder of Rocket Development Corporation (RDC), the creator of the Enerjet composite model rocket motors, and Roos founded Flight Systems, Inc. (FSI).

An industrial accident while employed at Thiokol would wreck Rahkonen's career and leave his health in tatters, something he attributed to working with so many exotic chemicals used in rocket propellant. Rahkonen retired from Thiokol in 1990.

In 1998, Rahkonen's somewhat unusual perspective on life inspired a short documentary film entitled "*Ihmeellinen viesti toiselta tähdeltä*," which translates into "*A Strange Message from Another Star*." The film, directed and produced by Veli Granö of Finland, received several awards abroad.

Rahkonen is survived by his wife Francoise of Ogden, Utah, five children, thirteen grandchildren and six great grandchildren. A memorial service in celebration of his life is being planned for the

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